



A SUFFOLK TABERNACLE THE IRSWICH UNITARIAN MEETING HOUSE

A GUIDE AND BRIEF HISTORY, BY CLIFF REED

Introduction

'As large and as fine a building of that kind as most on this side of England, and the inside the best finished of any I have seen, London not excepted.'



So Daniel Defoe wrote of the Meeting House in 1722. Today his judgement remains true, for this Grade One listed building is one of the finest surviving Dissenting Meeting Houses in the country, and one of Ipswich's most important historic structures.

Through a combination of luck and good judgement, the Meeting House retains its original aspect and character more or less intact. This adds to its rarity for few such Meeting Houses have survived, and fewer still without drastic alteration. The rarity is heightened still further by its timber-frame construction. It is believed to be the only remaining example of a purpose-built timber-framed Dissenting Meeting House of its period.

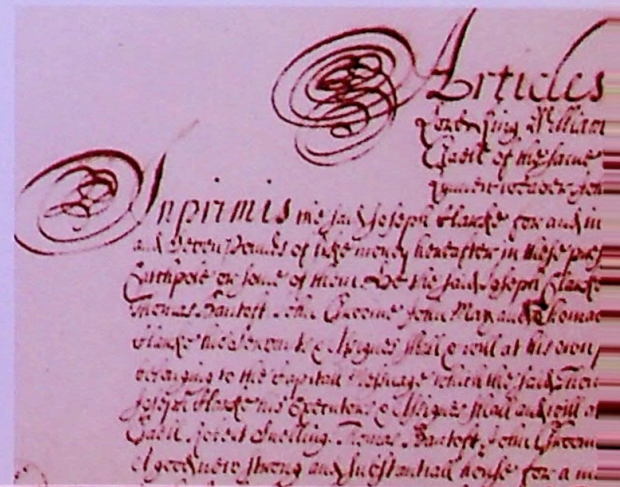
Beginnings

The land for the Meeting House, in a courtyard off St. Nicholas Street, was purchased for £150 by the Ipswich mercer, Thomas Bantoft. The contract for building it was signed on 5th August 1699 by six people on behalf of the congregation and by Joseph Clark, 'house carpenter', of Ipswich. The cost, excluding windows, galleries, pews and pulpit, was £256-14s-6d. The galleries cost a further £96. The contract - still extant - provided for 'four Barrells of good small Beere' to be supplied to Clark and his workmen whilst 'Imployed in the said Building' - perhaps supplied by Thomas Catchpole, 'beer brewer', one of the congregation's signatories! The prefabricated timber-frame construction meant that the basic building work did not take long - about two-and-a-half months - and the official opening service was held on 26th April 1700.

The sermon preached on that occasion by the Rev. John Fairfax still survives. Entitled 'Primitiae Synagogae' ('First Synagogues', or 'First Meeting Houses') it is a scripturally-based argument in defence of the building of the Meeting House, which was evidently not without its opponents. In a crucial passage Fairfax declared:

'I cannot censure, as some do, but must commend this congregation that they have at so great charge erected this...meeting place, and adorned it both without and within. It is no other than what becometh the use to which it is designed. It is but reasonable that an house for God...should equal, if not exceed our own habitation.'

It was not until 14th February 1711 that the first Trust Deed was signed. Thomas Bantoft was now dead and his executors, Elizabeth Bantoft (his sister) and Samuel Bury, completed the formalities with the newly-appointed trustees. These were twenty-one in number and comprised a beer-brewer (Thomas Catchpole again), a clothier, a linen-draper, a woollen-draper, a hosier, a tallow chandler, a wool-comber, a schoolmaster, an ironmonger, a chairmaker, two maltsters, three 'yeomen' and six 'gentlemen'.





The Building

The Meeting House measures 60 feet by 50 feet (18 metres by 15 metres) with a ground area of 2,800 square feet (252 square metres). The ceiling is 22 feet (6.6 metres) high. The building stands on brick plinths, with timber-framed stud walls. The double-pitched hipped roof is tiled and supported by four wooden columns, traditionally said to be ship's masts. Each of the three doorways is surmounted by an elliptical lunette, and the other windows in the north, west and east walls are square-headed with two lights, divided by a transom. Much of the leaded glass is original. The circular windows high in the south wall, and perhaps the rounded heads of the windows below them, may date from the major restoration of 1900.

Externally, the walls are plastered. At the eaves, a wooden modillion cornice doubles as a gutter on the east, west and north walls. The doorcases have elaborate pediments and surrounds, each with its own pair of carved brackets - doves and cherubs on the north side, foliage on the east. The forecourt north of the Meeting House, now opening on to Friars Street, was originally a burial ground - opened in 1806. The area to the east is one of the few remaining courtyards that were once characteristic of the Ipswich townscape. The buildings on the south and east sides of this courtyard predate the Meeting House. The southern range was adapted as meeting rooms for the congregation in 1975, replacing a hall that stood in the courtyard from the late 19th century until this time. The 'upper room' of this range has a particularly fine array of roof timbers.







The internal arrangement of the Meeting House is characteristic of the Reformed Protestant church design of its period.

The high pulpit in the centre of the south wall dominates the space, emphasizing the pre-eminence of 'the Word, read or preached' (Fairfax) in the worship of this tradition. The central space was provided for a communion table, emphasizing the democracy of the Protestant Lord's Supper 'in the midst of the congregation'. The contrast with earlier church design is both striking and deliberate, reflecting the distinctive theology of the Reformers. The clustering of the pews and galleries around the central space emphasizes the concept of the congregation as a 'gathered community' - even a family - and of the building as a Meeting House. The clear glass of the windows, in contrast to the stained-glass 'picture windows' of medieval churches, illustrates the Puritan concern with simplicity and the 'clear light' of the Gospel and of Reason. The same Puritan opposition to 'idolatry' explains the lack of original representative imagery depicting people, animals or supernatural beings.



Some interior details

The magnificent hexagonal pulpit is the work, if not of the great wood-carver Grinling Gibbons himself, then certainly of one of his pupils. The involvement of Gibbons' workshop in the Meeting House has led to speculation that his great collaborator on London's City churches, Sir Christopher Wren, might have had a hand in this building too.

The richly carved and decorated pulpit stands on a tulip base and is reached by a stair with twisted balusters. It is surmounted by a carving of pineapple design. The superb acoustics of the building make a 'sounding board' unnecessary. Below the pulpit is a reading-desk of humbler workmanship. The box-pews are characteristic of the 17th century and are original.







However, the two main blocks of downstairs pews were rearranged in the 1900 restoration so that all the seats face the front. Originally, the pews had seats on three or four sides, and this arrangement can still be seen in the large pews abutting the east and west walls. One of these, on the east side, contains a sample of the original white brick flooring, replaced elsewhere by wooden parquet in 1900. The pews in the galleries are in their original positions. For much of the building's existence, families rented their own pews and 'pew-rents' were a principal source of income. The remains of locks can still be seen on some pews, illustrating just how private they were! In a few of the pews, wooden pegs can be seen. Proverbially, these are wig-pegs, on which gentlemen could place their wigs - these still being fashionable when the Meeting House was built. Like most of the timber used in the interior, the pews are made of pine.

The gallery fronts are panelled, with a Tuscan entablature running round the bottom, so complementing the columns and the pulpit.





The large double doors in the east wall were originally the main entrance. The small modern brass plate in the right-hand door conceals a spyhole. This lines up precisely with the narrow alleyway into St. Nicholas Street, and here a watch could be kept for attackers or hostile officials, reminding us that religious liberty was by no means assured when the Meeting House was built.

The central three-tiered chandelier is an original fitting. It is of Dutch manufacture, a reminder of the strong links between East Anglian Dissenters and their counterparts in the Netherlands. It holds twenty-four candles and makes a magnificent sight when ablaze on a winter's evening! The wrought ironwork on which it hangs is not original, however, and probably dates from 1900 when the ceiling was replaced.

The hexagonally-faced clock on the north gallery is also original and predates the building. The winged cherub above it may well be a later addition, being rather out of place in this austere Puritan setting.







The entrance vestibule and the vestry were created by the erection of thin screens and are not original. The pews would once have extended right to the back of the building. The incorporation of the west porch into the vestry is a modern development.



The organ, built by the Ipswich firm Bishop and Sons in 1878, was installed in the Meeting House - its third home - in 1900. It has two manuals and sixteen stops. It is the third organ the Meeting House has had. The first was installed in 1799 and was first played on 17th March of that year. It was located in the north gallery, as was the second organ, installed in 1865. In 1885, however, it was moved downstairs, where it was damaged in a flood.

The extensive restoration of the Meeting House in 1900 was directed by the Unitarian architect, Ronald P. Jones. Other major works on the fabric were undertaken in 1930, 1954 (when electricity was installed) and 1975, when the west and south walls were refounded. Most recently, from 1988, a rolling programme has seen the full restoration of the south, east and west walls – affected by death-watch beetle, woodworm and wet-rot; the redecoration of the exterior; the refurbishment and extension of the entrance vestibule and the vestry, and other work designed to enhance this historic but living place.



The story

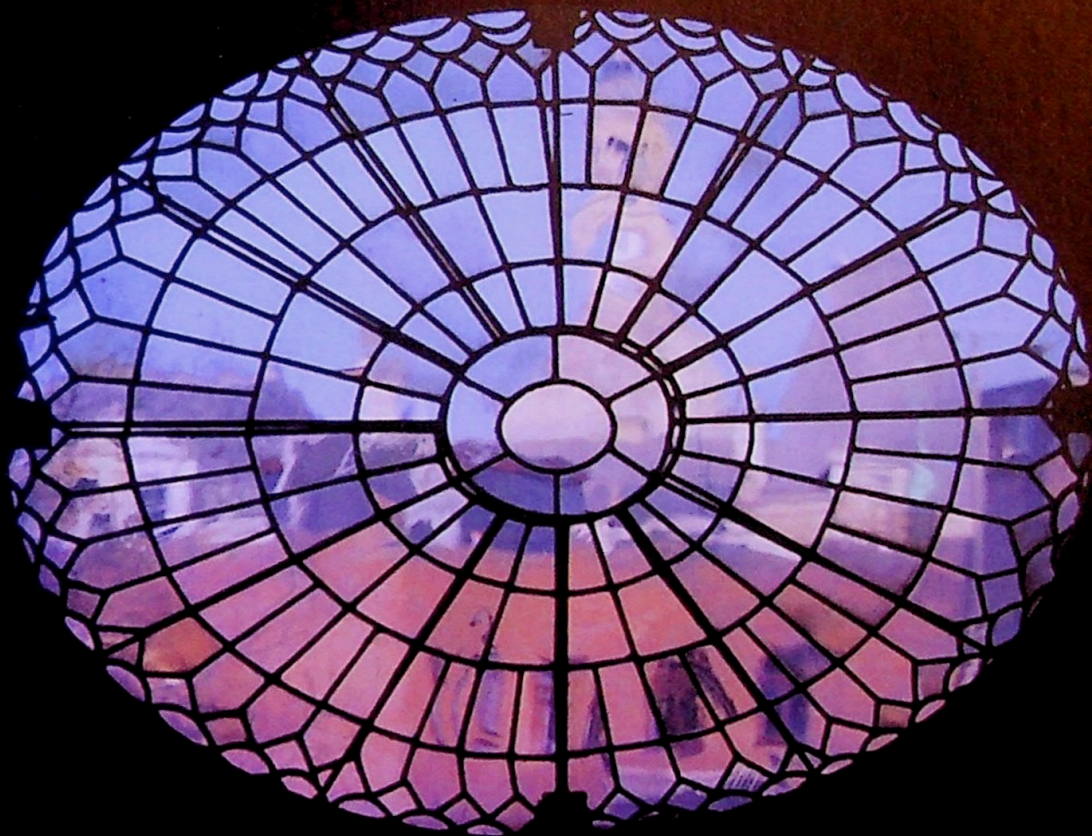
The congregation was founded some time after the 1662 Act of Uniformity had excluded from the Church of England those clergy who would not conform - hence 'Nonconformists' - to its provisions. In 1672 this Nonconformist or Dissenting congregation of combined Presbyterians and Independents (later called Congregationalists) called their first minister, Owen Stockton. He was one of the 'ejected' clergy of 1662, as was his successor, John Fairfax, who was appointed in 1680. At this time, the congregation worshipped in the Old Monastery House in Turret Lane. When the Presbyterians and Congregationalists parted company in 1686, Fairfax continued with the Presbyterians. They worshipped in rented rooms, most latterly in Silent Street. Among their friends and patrons was the Ipswich - born London merchant, philanthropist and pioneer Unitarian, Thomas Firmin. Fairfax and his congregation were still Presbyterian, however, albeit of a relatively liberal hue. The passing of the 1689 Act of Toleration opened the way for the building of the Meeting House, although ten years passed before work began. The Presbyterians were reluctant to accept their permanent exclusion from the Church of England, and as Fairfax said at the opening of the Meeting House in 1700, 'Let none think that I have spoken a word to the derogation of...our publick churches...Had we the liberty of those places, we should seek no other.'

*'...we are now in the Tabernacle
of Meeting, where
we meet not only
one with another,
but all with God.'*



The Rev. John Fairfax, 26th April 1700.

Worship in the Meeting House in those early days followed a Puritan pattern. Musical instruments were forbidden and the only singing was of metrical settings of the Psalms, led by a precentor from the reading-desk below the pulpit. We know from Fairfax's sermon that the congregation covered their heads when 'the Word (was) read or preached', that they stood for prayer and that it was deemed inappropriate 'to talk, or laugh, or indulge ourselves to sleep, or give liberty to wandering eyes, thoughts or affection'. It is likely that the sexes were segregated - men downstairs, women upstairs - in an interesting and not insignificant echo of traditional Jewish practice.





Although theologically orthodox, Fairfax and his congregation belonged to the increasingly liberal tradition of English Presbyterianism. We get something of its flavour from some words spoken at Fairfax's funeral service in the Meeting House by his colleague from Bury St Edmunds, Samuel Bury: 'Let us never impale religion within ourselves or presently call fire from heaven on them that will not receive us. Let religion in its own latitude be the common bond of all union, and whatever difference may be amongst us in smaller matters, yet let us be lovers of all good men.'



Among the worshippers in the Meeting House in these early Presbyterian days were the artist Thomas Gainsborough and the men of the Royal Scots Greys when stationed in the Ipswich barracks.

During the course of the 18th century, the congregation and its ministers moved gradually towards a Unitarian position, stressing the unity - as opposed to the trinity - of God, and the humanity - as opposed to the deity - of Jesus. Doctrinal change was facilitated by the 'open' nature of the Trust Deed, which stipulated no theological conditions other than that the Meeting House be used for the 'Worship of Almighty God'. The crucial period was the ministry of Thomas Scott, from 1737 to 1766. Scott, an Arabic scholar, was one of the few ministerial friends of the young Joseph Priestley during his pastorate in Needham Market from 1755 to 1758. Priestley, besides his later fame as a scientist, was to become in time the foremost Unitarian minister of his day. After Scott's time both ministers and congregation were at least Arian in their beliefs. By the beginning of the 19th century the theological position of the congregation was not in doubt and ministers like Thomas Rees and Thomas Drummond represented a new and aggressive brand of Unitarianism.

The passing of the so-called Trinity Act in 1813 removed the legal penalties for professing Unitarianism and the resultant lingering restraints on Unitarians calling themselves by that name. The 1844 Dissenters' Chapels Act confirmed Unitarian congregations, like that in Ipswich, in possession of buildings originally constructed by people who were not Unitarian in their beliefs.

Two ministers caused the congregation problems at this period. In 1832 the trustees dismissed Andrew Melville for misconduct and running up debts in the town. His successor, Joseph Ketley caused further embarrassment by very publicly renouncing Unitarianism and resigning in 1836. It was left to Thomas Felix Thomas to get things back on an even keel, and his photograph begins the series depicting former ministers that hangs in the vestry.

The approach from St. Nicholas Street.



Among the prominent laypeople in the congregation in the mid-19th century were Herbert Wright, editor of the 'Ipswich Journal', and the writer John Glyde, author of 'The Moral, Social and Religious Condition of Ipswich', published in 1850.

The Sunday School was reported as offering a wide curriculum for a general education, and the ministers conducted an academy in one of the buildings between the Meeting House and St. Nicholas Street.

Later in the century, a visiting preacher on several occasions was the nationally eminent journalist, novelist and translator of Spinoza, William Hale White, alias 'Mark Rutherford'. In 1900 the artist E. Lucking Tavener became minister, frequently preaching on themes suggested by famous paintings. One of his own paintings, an interior of the Meeting House, is still in the congregation's possession.

A prominent Ipswich Unitarian at the turn of the century was Frank Woolnough. He wrote for both the 'East Anglian Daily Times' and the 'Mercury' (as 'XYZ'), and was a campaigner for the opening of a crematorium. His main contribution to the town was as curator of Ipswich Museum - for 27 years - and as the person responsible for converting the newly-acquired Christchurch Mansion for public use. Frank Woolnough was not progressive in all matters though, and in 1913 he resigned from the congregation's committee in protest at the election of women to its number!

Two ministers in the 1930s and 40s aroused controversy. Dr. John Lewis was an active and outspoken socialist who later joined the Communist Party. His successor, in 1938, was Joseph Burton, whose vocal pacifism got him into trouble when war broke out the following year. He was effectively dismissed by the trustees in 1940, causing a number of members to resign from the congregation in protest. One of those who did so, Marianne Prime, later recalled that she resented 'the intolerance of the trustees...especially as one of our Unitarian principles is tolerance towards others'. A difficult period followed this rupture. Into this less than happy situation came the congregation's - and perhaps Ipswich's - first woman minister, Winifred Brown, who served from 1943 to 1946.

The Meeting House reflected in the walls of Willis Group country head office.



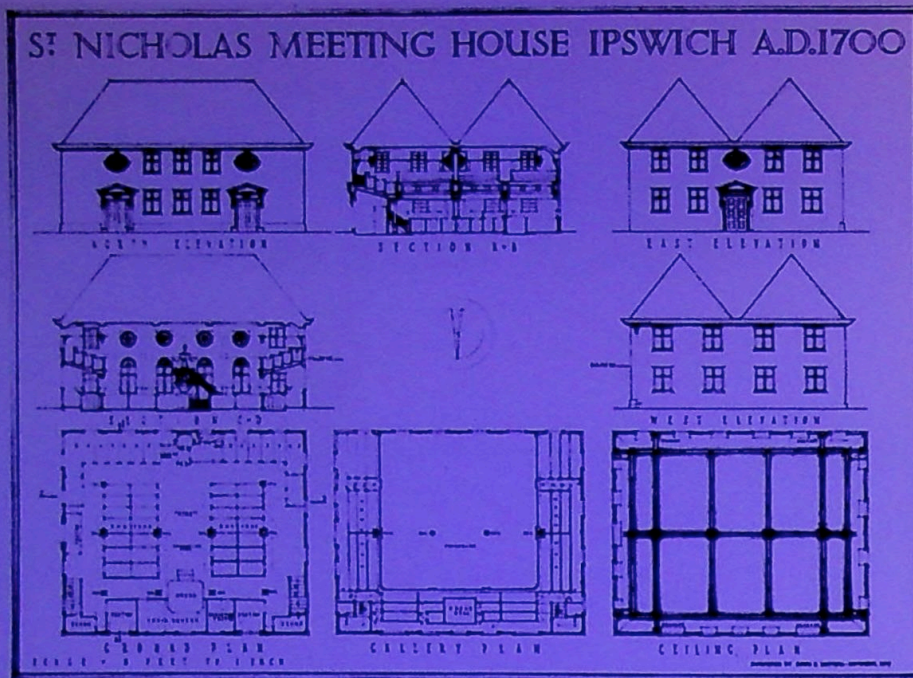
The post-war period saw Ipswich becoming a more multi-cultural place, to which the Unitarian congregation sought to respond. In the 1950s, during Phillip Hewett's brief but significant ministry, the congregation offered its hall to accommodate the newly-formed Ipswich Caribbean Association. Later, in 1980 - and for fourteen years thereafter - the Unitarian Meeting House hosted the inter-faith Civic Celebration of Community, an annual event very much in harmony with Unitarian principles.

Something of the changing feel of congregational life during the late 20th century was described in 1986 by Marianne Prime, who first came to the Meeting House in 1922. She recalled, 'No more walking sedately down our drive into Friars Street after service, we now laugh and talk as we wend our way towards our new hall for coffee and biscuits, a chat or sometimes a friendly discussion arising from the sermon'.

It is worth noting, in conclusion, that during Hewett's ministry and that of his successor, Nicholas Teape, there was a return to calling the building a 'Meeting House', after many years being described as a church or chapel. This was felt to be true both to its origins, character and history and to the way its present congregation feel about it - a place to meet with each other and with God.

Although it is a building of great historical and architectural interest, the Meeting House is also a living place - the spiritual home of a liberal religious Unitarian community who value the open mind, the free conscience and the loving spirit as the keys to faith. You will be welcome should you join us for worship!

Inset picture shows an interior view of the Meeting House after the major restoration in 1900.



Scaled plan and survey drawn up by John C. Butters in November 1939.

References:

'Primitiae Synagogae. A sermon preached at Ipswich, April 26. 1700, at the opening of a new erected Meeting House, by John Fairfax, A.M. minister of the Gospel to the congregation there assembling.' Thomas Parkhurst, London, and Henry Truelove, Ipswich, 1700.'

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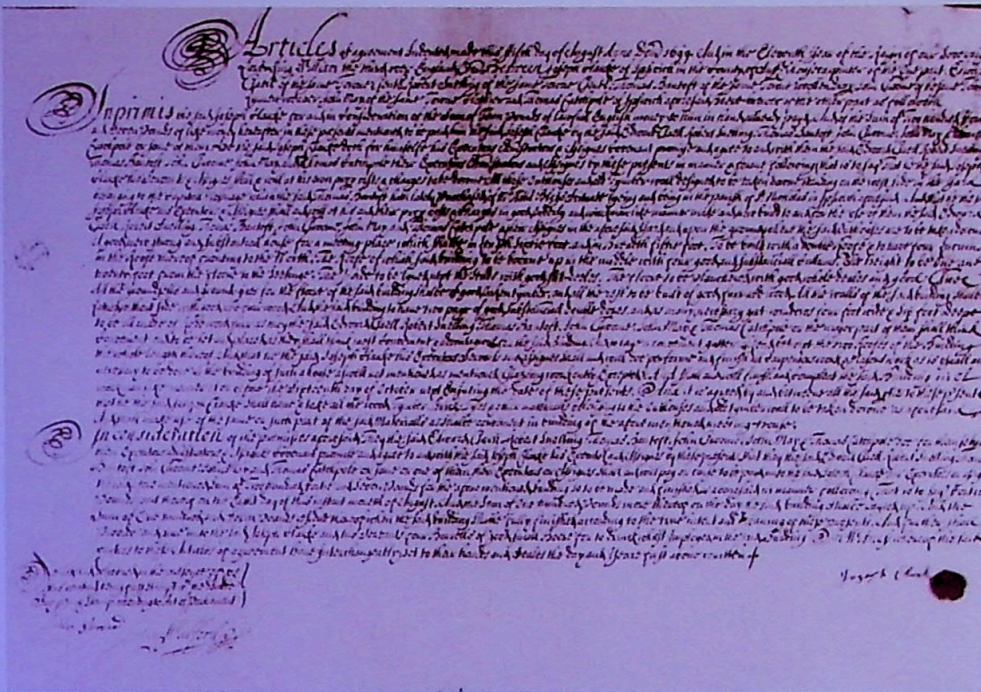
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Cliff Reed has been minister at the Ipswich Unitarian Meeting House since 1976.

The Ipswich Unitarian Trustees would like to thank Willis Group for their help in the production of this brochure.



The original contract for building, signed 5 August 1699.

Ministers of the congregation

Owen Stockton	1672-1680	Joseph William Smith	1866-1878
John Fairfax	1680-1700	Thomas Bennet Broadrick	1879-1891
Samuel Baxter	1701-1740	William E. Atack	1892-1895
William Shepherd	1721-1724	William Jellie	1896-1899
Samuel Say	1725-1734	E. Lucking Tavener	1900-1908
Thomas Scott	1737-1766	Arthur Golland	1910-1914
Peter Emans	1761-1762	John W. Saunders	1915-1920
Robert Lewin	1762-1770	Wilfred Harris	1920-1923
William Wood	1770-1773	Wallace A. McCubbin	1924-1929
James Pilkington	1774-1778	John Lewis	1930-1936
William Jervis	1778-1797	Joseph C.G. Burton	1938-1940
Samuel Parker	1797-1803	Winifred Brown	1943-1946
Thomas Rees	1803-1805	Harold A. Gore	1948-1949
Thomas Drummond	1805-1813	William Haworth	1950-1952
Isaac Perry	1813-1825	A. Phillip B. Hewett	1954-1956
John Philip	1825-1827	Nicholas John Teape	1957-1974
Andrew Melville	1827-1832	Edward A. Cahill*	1975
Joseph Ketley	1834-1836	Robert H. Holmes*	1976
Thomas Felix Thomas	1836-1852	Clifford Martin Reed	1976-
Henry Knott	1852-1853	David A. Robins**	1992
John T. Cooper	1853-1863		
John Harrison	1863-1864		

* interim appointment

** five month American exchange ministry

